

# 40 Questions with Clive Spong

In celebration of the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Railway Series

Curated by Michael (a.k.a. 01Salty) over 2024/2025

With thanks to those who suggested questions on Twitter!

## General Questions

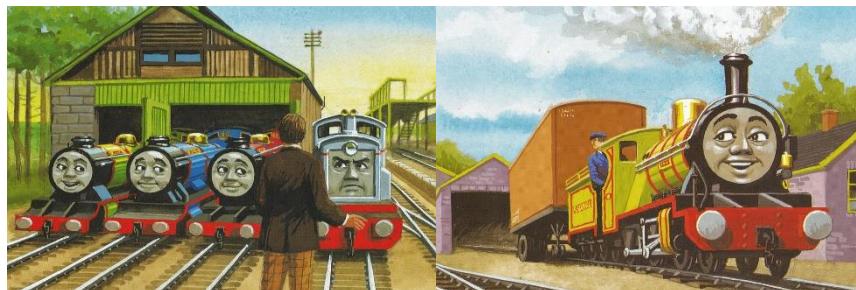
### 1. What inspired your art style when drawing for the Railway Series?

I wanted to keep fairly close to the style of the previous illustrators, but with a bit of a personal touch. Keeping the background scenery and mechanical details realistic. With the characters' faces, I exaggerated their expressions a bit, but wanted to keep them looking human, rather than too "cartoony".



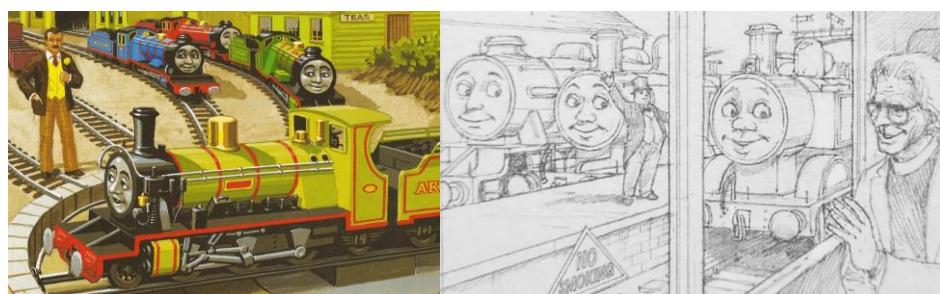
### 2. Are there any characters in particular you enjoyed illustrating?

I found the group of small engines more fun, for some reason.



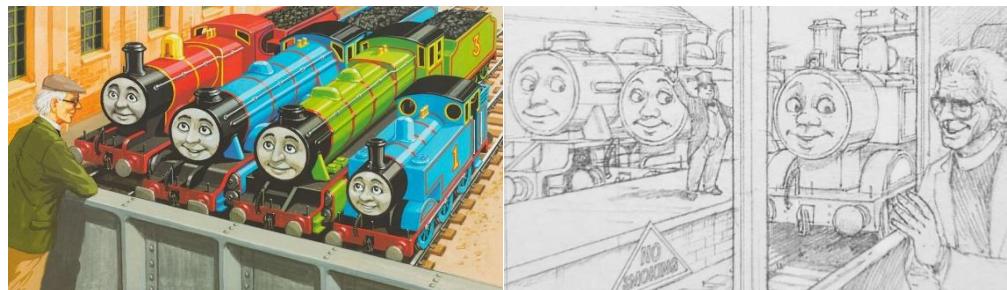
### 3. Was there ever a time you were asked to change/alter an illustration, or have one cut entirely?

I think there was the odd time when I had to correct a technical detail or two, but I never had to scrap an illustration completely. Mind you, I did send in pencil roughs before doing the finished artwork.



4. One of your last pieces for the Railway Series was the art for the Royal Mail stamp book celebrating Rev. Awdry's centenary in 2011. There was also a sketch included in the book, of an alternate piece. Can you share the story behind this one?

As you say, the pencil drawing was an alternative, but to be honest, I can't remember discussions or details about the choice.



5. Do you have a favourite illustration that you've done?

*Wilbert the Forest Engine*, pages 24 & 39

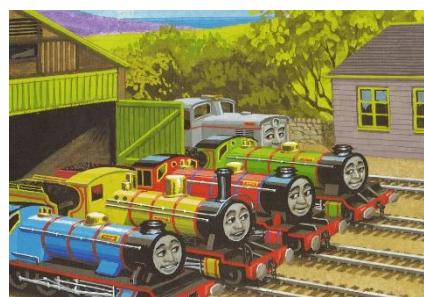
The snow scenes in *Thomas & Victoria*

The Great Railway Show – with Stephenson's Rocket



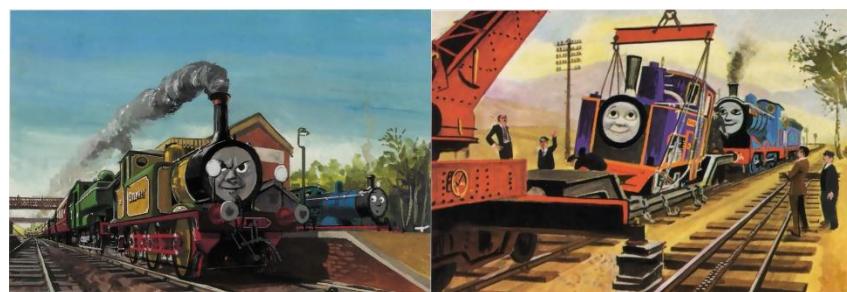
6. Do you overall have a favourite character (or characters)?

Again, I think the small engines – but not any one particular character.



7. Are there any characters you would've liked to draw more of, or characters that appeared in earlier books that you would've loved to draw but never got a chance to? For example, the Mountain Engines, Flying Scotsman or Stepney.

Yes – both Stepney & Culdee



8. One thing I love about your illustrations is the attention to detail, not just with characters but with geography, for example the Killdane standing stones seen in *Fire Engine*, plus new locations like the China Clay Pits in *Down the Drain* and Kellsthorpe Castle in *Gordon's Fire Service*. What sort of inspiration did you pull from, to show all the locations never seen on paper before?

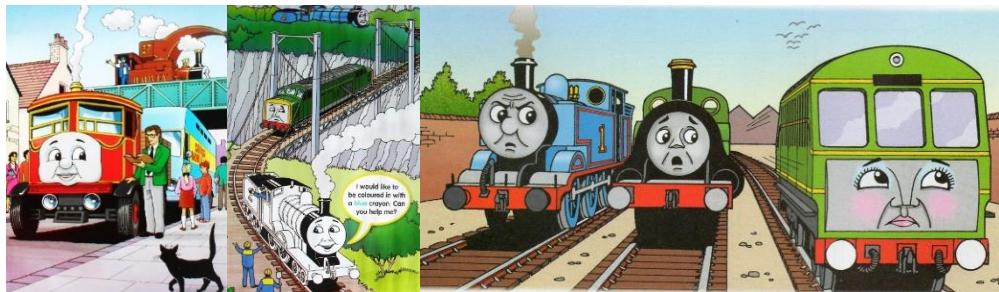
I always felt the backgrounds and landscapes should be as realistic as possible. In some cases I was supplied with photographic reference and drawings (of a similar nature of course – the actual scenes being fictional).



9. The Awdry Extravaganzas have had original Railway Series illustrations on display. It was revealed to the public that your paintings were much smaller in size than any of the previous illustrators. What was the reason behind this choice? Was it from the publisher, or yourself? As far as I remember, I always did the artwork as near to the finished printed size as possible – I don't recall there being any stipulation.



10. It's long been rumoured that you illustrated a great number of magazine stories in the 90s/2000s, and I subscribe to this theory due to the clear stylistic similarities between them and your Railway Series work, although to my knowledge it's never been confirmed. Are you able to confirm this speculation? And if yes, how did you find illustrating TV Series original characters as opposed to Awdry creations?



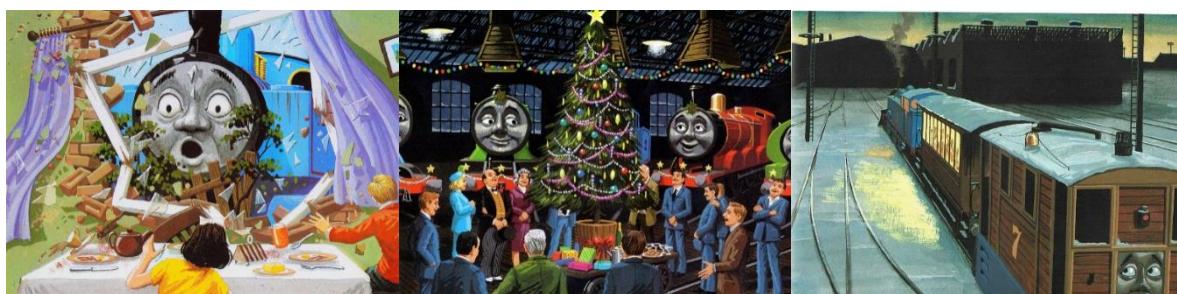
Although the style is very similar, I didn't do these three illustrations. I did however do some illustrations for the Thomas comic for a while. These were line drawings that were coloured up on the computer by someone else.

11. If the above is the case, there has been one example of a 'cameo' character, being the miniature water park engine seen below, from the story "*The Tiny Engine*". Do you remember the inspiration for this little blue guy? Would you have a name in mind for him as well? Ditto – it looks so like my style, I was beginning to doubt myself, but I'm sure I didn't do that one either. As for a name for the miniature engine – he's blue and works by the lakeside – how about 'Kingfisher'?



12. You worked with Rev. Wilbert Awdry on two storybooks- *Thomas's Christmas Party* and *Thomas Comes to Breakfast*. What was it like collaborating with him? Was it much different to working with his son?

No, not much different. They were both very helpful and enthusiastic.



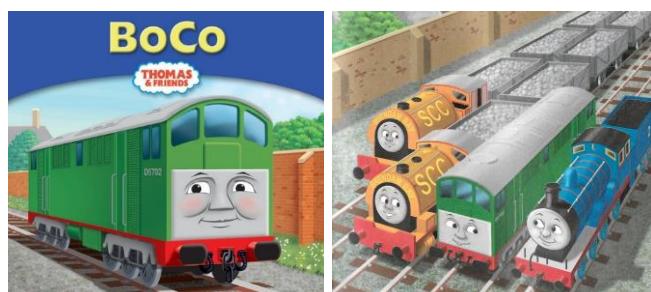
13. In the early 80s you re-illustrated the Island of Sodor map for a printed re-release. It included a number of things not shown on previous maps, like the Skarloey Funicular Railway and the towns not served by rail like Ballaswein and Kellaby. What was that process like? Did you work with Wilbert or both him and Christopher?

I seem to remember both were involved.



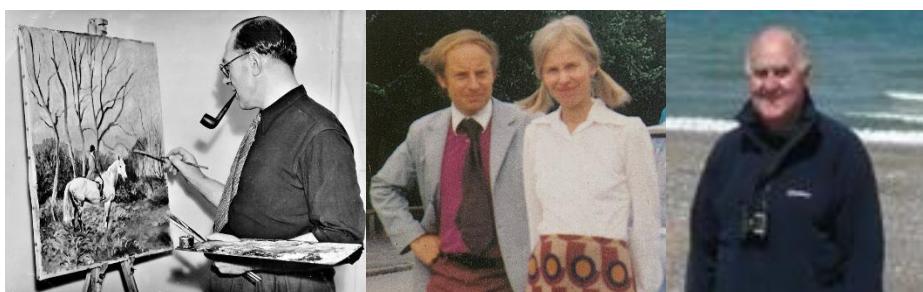
14. In 2008 you were credited as co-illustrator for the My Thomas Story Library book 'BoCo'. I've been in correspondence with that book series illustrator Robin Davies and he confirmed your involvement. What did your involvement entail exactly?

To be honest, I can't remember exactly. I might have done some pencil roughs and we probably discussed various relevant details, but those aren't my drawings. My name only appears on the book above.



15. Did you ever get to meet any of the other illustrators of the Railway Series?

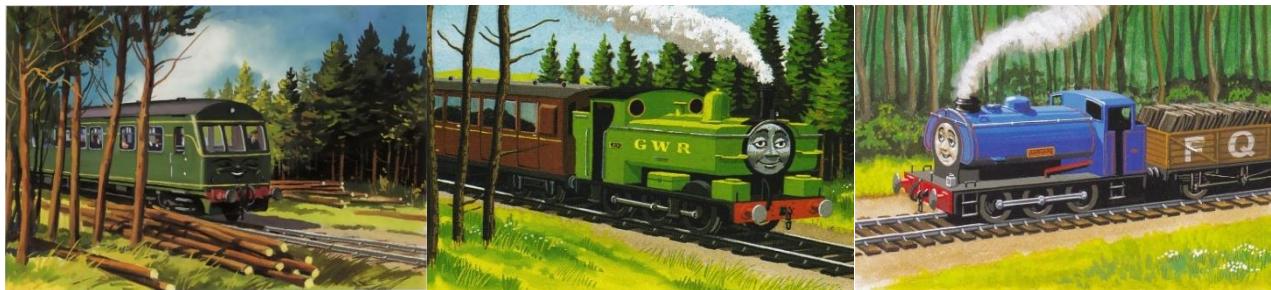
No, I never did.



## Specific Locations & Characters

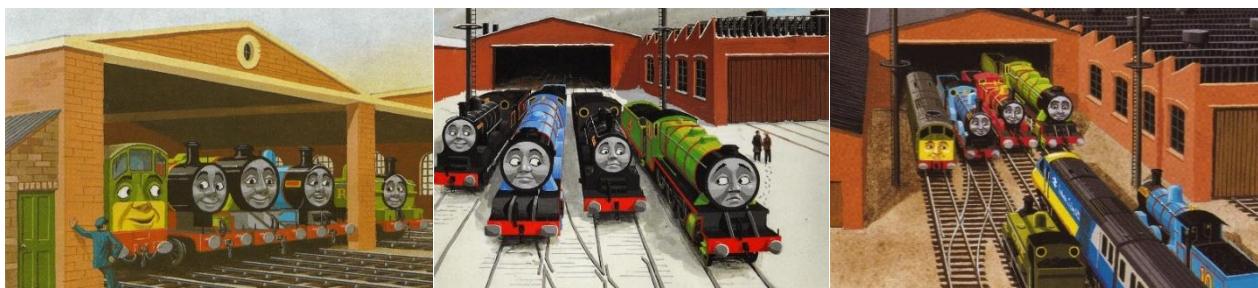
16. While story text normally helps identify where engines are located in any given illustration, one lingering mystery has been the forest area on Thomas' branch line. Were you given any insight into its placement when illustrating it?

I don't think I was given a specific location, but as it was Wilbert "the Forest Engine", I just thought it appropriate to show him going through woodlands.



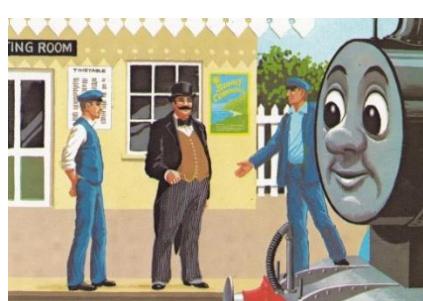
17. There's been a lot of speculation over the 'new' engine sheds at Tidmouth that started appearing from *Gordon the High-Speed Engine* onwards. Some say that the new sheds outright replaced the old shed (seen up to *James & the Diesel Engines*), but others think both sheds simultaneously exist in Tidmouth yard. Is there any insight you might be able to share, having drawn it so many times?

As far as I was aware, all the sheds were there simultaneously, in different parts of the yard.



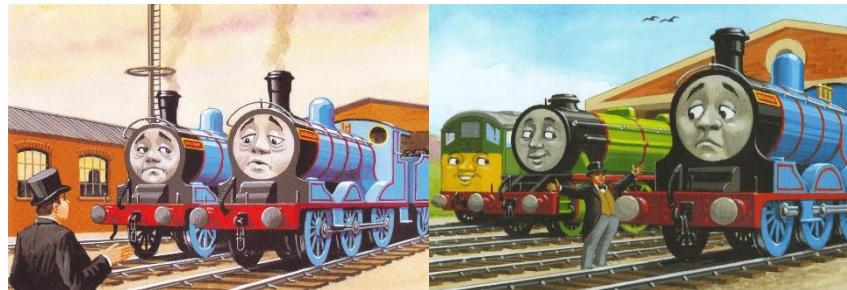
18. In *Really Useful Engines*, the Fat Controller is shown with a big, bushy moustache. It never appears again, which begs the question if it was a personal flourish by you that had to be changed later? Or perhaps something from Chris Awdry that he later changed his mind about?

As that was the first book I illustrated in the series, it was a bit of artistic licence. Later it was decided that, for the sake of continuity, he ought to have a shave!



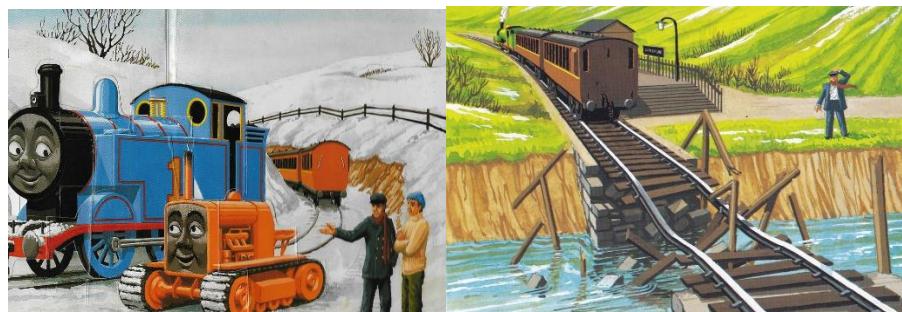
19. Donald and Douglas were consistently drawn with notably bushy eyebrows. Was this design choice mandated?

No, it wasn't really intentional.



20. At some points in the books, Annie and Clarabel were illustrated without their faces. Now it wasn't uncommon for random coaches to be faceless throughout the whole series, but these examples stand out. Was there a stylistic or perhaps narrative reason behind the omissions?

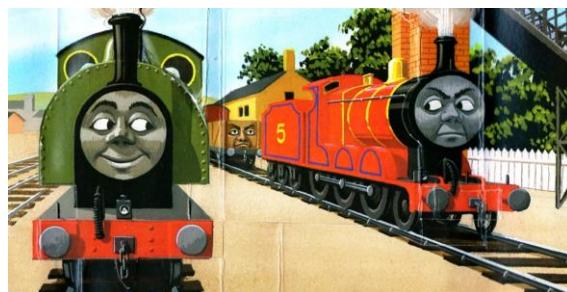
Although Annie & Clarabel were both named characters, I don't recall ever showing their faces. The reason being they usually appeared coupled up to Thomas, so their faces wouldn't have been visible. There were occasions when the train was shown from behind, but I never considered putting faces on their back-ends!



(Author's note: Seems Clive had forgotten about *More About Thomas the Tank Engine* and *Thomas & the Evil Diesel*!)

21. When you illustrated the pop-up book 'James the Red Engine and the Troublesome Trucks', you featured a green saddle-tank engine, which looked very different to the blue tank engine originally depicted by C. Reginald Dalby. Was this design influenced by Christopher Awdry, or yourself? Was it based off a real engine?

To be honest, I can't remember. I must have been given some reference to work from.

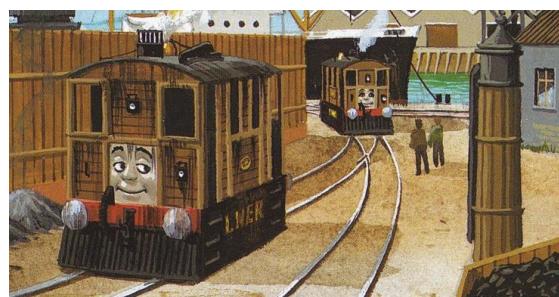


22. Both the aforementioned green engine, and one of Toby's brothers, appear nameless in the books. Like how you christened the orange crane 'Murphy' in our previous emails, would you have any names in mind for these extras?

Toby's brother – maybe Tristram (Tris 'TRAM'!!)

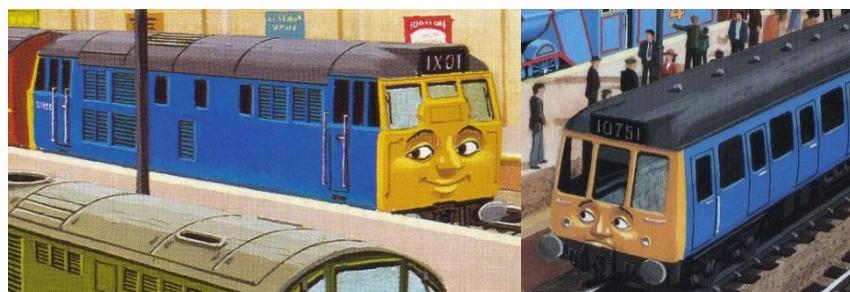
'Toby' and 'Jug' would be fun, but too silly!

The little green engine – Lincoln?



23. To continue the trend of christening 'extras' in the books, would you happen to have names in mind for these two diesels who appeared in *Gordon the High-Speed Engine*?

As they're diesels and slightly "younger" than the steam engines, maybe more modern names. How about Dwayne & Eddy?



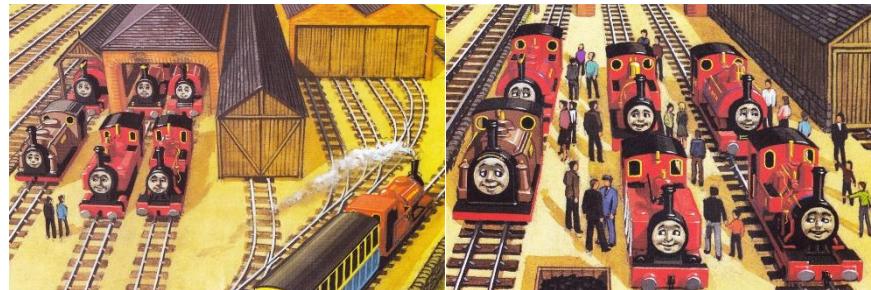
24. On the topic of background or cameo characters, a Class 47 diesel (nicknamed 'the Works Diesel' by fans) has appeared numerous times in Chris Awdry's books. Can you confirm if all the examples below are in fact the same Class 47? If so, did Christopher ever imply a name for this guy, or at least what his number was?

Definitely the same engine. As for his name & number, I never heard it mentioned. He was always just "The diesel" engine.



**25. In 'New Little Engine', Duke was drawn without his tender. Do you remember if there was a reason for this?**

It must have been an oversight – I can't think of a reason. It was never queried at the time.



**26. Was Henrietta suddenly receiving a face in 'Thomas and Victoria' (fourth image) a choice originating from Chris Awdry, or yourself?**

She was 'included' in the conversation with Toby and the quarry manager, so she had to have a face to show some reaction. It was taken for granted.



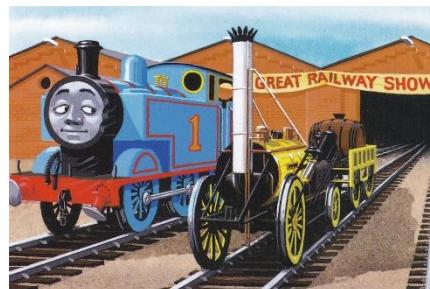
**27. It's notable in Chris Awdry's books that multiple characters with two cabs were depicted with faces at both ends, for example Toby and BoCo. Was this interesting concept mandated by Chris, or of your own choice?**

Again, it was taken as read. They had two cabs, therefore two faces. They had to see where they were going – whichever direction.



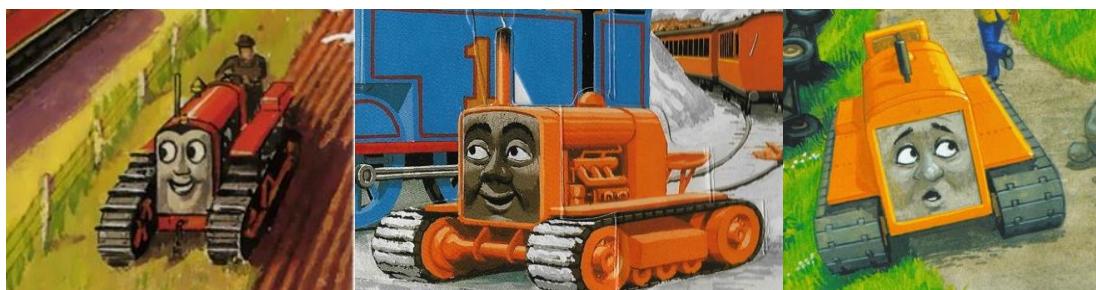
28. In previous emails you mentioned the challenge of depicting the Rocket replica at the National Rail Museum due to not having space for a face. In your mind, is this locomotive still 'alive', in the same way most trucks and coaches are alive but without faces?

It did concern me a bit at the time, that he lacked personality, somewhat. But, as I said previously, I felt the historical accuracy of the mechanical details was more important. And although, as you say – faceless – I considered him as "live" as all the other star guests.



29. When illustrating Terence the Tractor in Chris Awdry's books, you depicted him without his seemingly famous widow's peak as drawn by C. Reginald Dalby and adapted into the TV Series. Was that the result of a conversation with Christopher, or a decision made by yourself? To me it seems it was done in an effort to have Terence look more realistic- would that be true?

Yes, I wanted to "square" him up a bit and make him look a little more tough and modern.

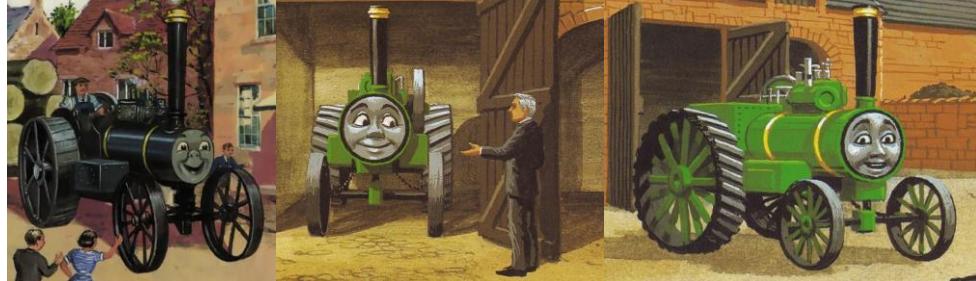


30. Continuing on with Terence, in *Thomas's Christmas Party* he is seen with a cab, of which he is never seen with again. Am I correct in suspecting this is simply an attachment for harsh weather, similar to his snowplough?

Yes, as far as I know, the cab was a temporary thing for rough weather

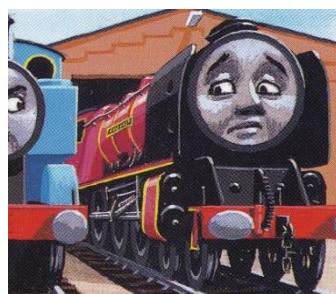


31. Trevor the Traction Engine's appearance in *Thomas and the Twins* was surprising as he is now green instead of black, originally seen in Rev. Awdry's story *Saved from Scrap*. Was this colour change influenced by the TV Series at all? Once again, who ultimately decided this change? Again, I don't recall any discussion about his colour. I must have been given some reference at the time, as I wouldn't have taken the liberty of changing his colour off my own bat.



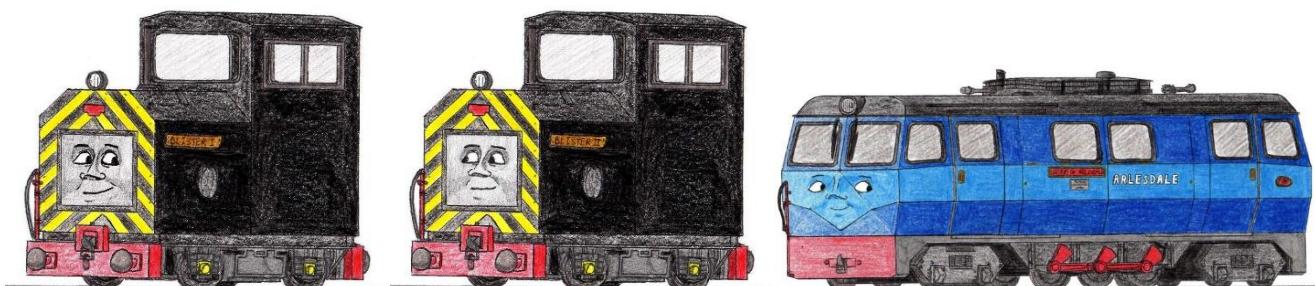
32. When illustrating *Thomas and the Great Railway Show*, you featured the real-life loco Duchess of Hamilton despite not being mentioned in the text. This appearance has become infamous for potentially showing the first ever female steam engine in the Railway Series books. What are your thoughts?

I was given a list (and pictures) of all the "Guest stars" and I thought it a nice change to have a female engine.



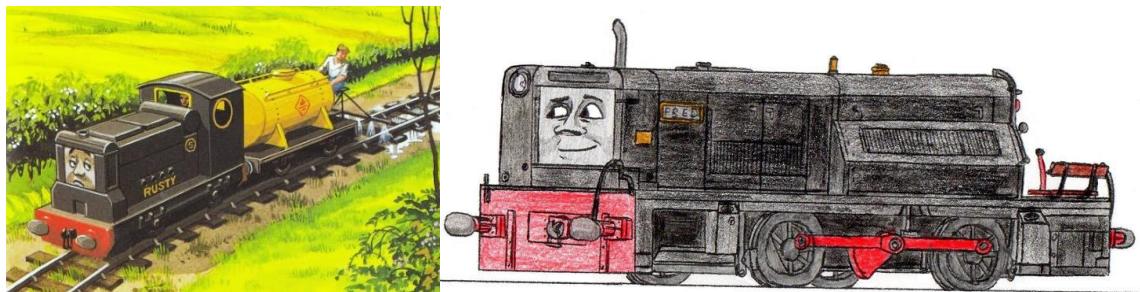
33. Chris Awdry's book *Jock the New Engine* introduced a character previously created by Wilbert Awdry and mentioned in his history book *The Island of Sodor*. There were three other Arlesdale engines mentioned by Wilbert too: Blister I, Blister II and Sigrid of Arlesdale (below are my own interpretations of them, based off Wilbert's descriptions). Do you recall if they were ever brought up in conversation for potential appearances?

No, I don't recall ever hearing of them.

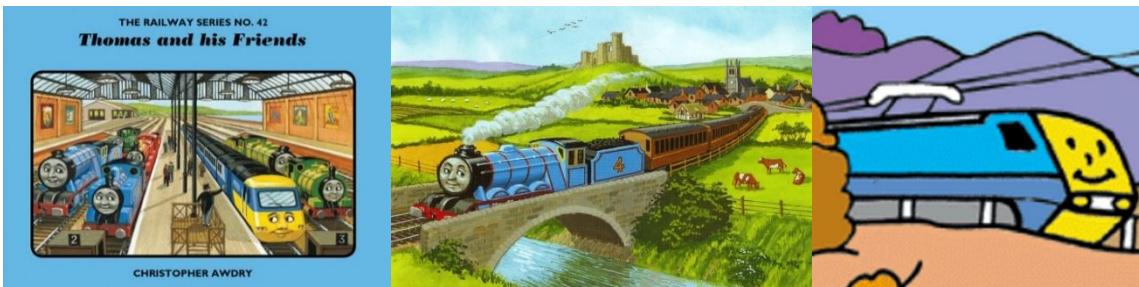


34. Similarly, in *New Little Engine* a new Skarloey Railway diesel character named Fred is mentioned by Rusty, although does not appear in illustrations. Was he ever on the cards for making an appearance?

I don't remember any discussion about Fred either. I like your drawings – lots of technical detail!

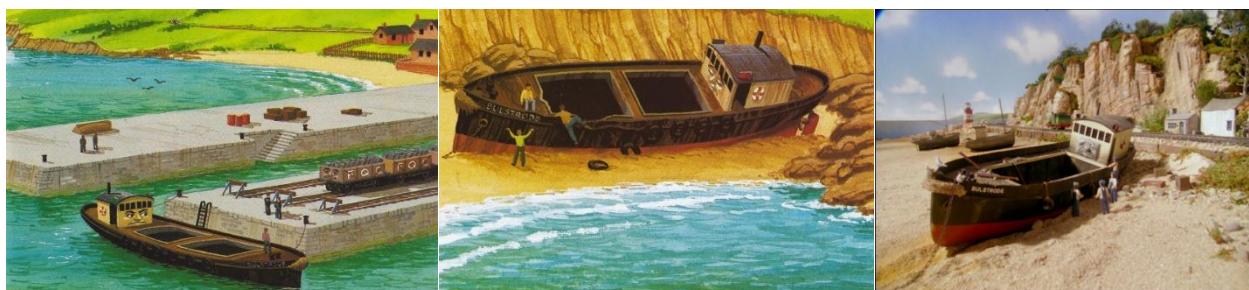


35. When illustrating the (current) last book of the Railway Series *Thomas and His Friends*, you see long awaited things like Pip & Emma officially joining the NWR, and an official mention of the Peel Godred Electric Engines after being relegated to Wilbert's supplemental material for decades. Was there ever a discussion to illustrate the electric engine itself, in Gordon's story? No, I don't recall any talk of illustrating the electric engine.

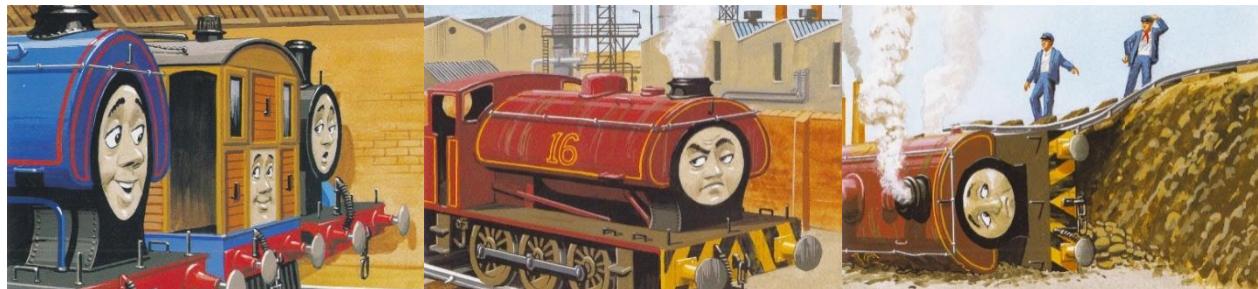


36. Tragically, the only character introduced by Chris Awdry and illustrated by you that ever made it into the TV Series was Bulstrode the Barge. Do you remember your reaction when you found out? Were you given credit, or received any correspondence from the crew who made the TV Series?

No, I never had any contact with the makers of the TV series.



37. In *Wilbert the Forest Engine*, Wilbert tells a story about Sixteen the foolish steelworks engine. It has been long speculated that Sixteen was in fact Wilbert himself, and he's sharing a story from his own history. Did Chris Awdry ever clarify if Sixteen was a whole different engine? He never specified, but the alter-ego sounds a good idea.



## Conclusion

38. I know it was asked in your previous interview with Sodor Island Fansite, but it begs being asked again. If there were ever another Railway Series book, would you be open to illustrating it?

Yes, I'd be happy to have a go. An "Old Boy's Reunion"!

39. It goes without saying that your work on the Railway Series/Thomas series is legendary and will always be remembered. Do you have anything you'd like to say to all the Thomas fans out there?

It was very enjoyable working on the series for such a long stretch. I really got to know all the characters, history & geography of the Island and its various railways.

I feel quite privileged to have been involved with something so universally popular and well known.

40. And finally, any advice for budding artists/illustrators?

And though so much work is done on the "Magic Box" these days, I think and hope there will always be a place for illustrators with a personal touch. I don't wish to sound like a 'Luddite', but I will always prefer working with a paintbrush rather than a keyboard.

***Many thanks to Clive Spong (and his wife Susie) for this Q&A!***

